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# VOICES FROM THE COUNCIL



EDITED BY **Michael R. Prendergast**  
AND **M. D. Ridge**

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Voices from the Council

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Phone 1-800-LITURGY (548-8749)

E-mail: [liturgy@ocp.org](mailto:liturgy@ocp.org)

[www.ocp.org](http://www.ocp.org)

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## Edward Schillebeeckx, OP



Interviewer: Carl Sterkens

### What was your capacity at the Council?

I was a private theological advisor to the Dutch episcopacy. Cardinal Bernard Johannes Alfrink [1900–1987] tried twice to let me be appointed as an official *peritus*, but (as we heard afterwards) Cardinal [Alfredo] Ottaviani personally prevented this, leaving the pope unaware of both the proposal and Ottaviani's decision. The reason for the refusal seems to have been a public, official Letter of the Dutch Episcopacy to the church in The Netherlands, dated November 24, 1960. In this document, about two years before the Council started, the bishops declared themselves in favor of an *aggiornamento*, or renewal of the Catholic church; in their colophon they explicitly mentioned my name as the main "ghostwriter" of that letter. This was correct. This Dutch episcopal document was translated into the major European languages and became very well known in The Netherlands and abroad. The Italian translation was prohibited by the Vatican, but was sold in secret and in great numbers. From that day on, the Vatican watched me closely, as I would soon find out. After the Council, the Cardinal-Prefect of the Congregation of Christian Faith four times required me to defend the orthodoxy of my thoughts and writings; luckily it never led to an official *fiat* or condemnation.

In the year preceding the Council, I wrote a personal document with critical remarks upon the pre-Vatican II drafts (the so-called “pre-schemata” or *schemas*) made by the Theological Commission of the Congregation of Faith in Rome. The document’s title was *Animadversiones, Remarques sur la première série de projets de Constitutions et de Décrets sur lesquels le Concile aura à se prononcer* (45 pages, Nimègue, August 1962). I wrote this document for the Dutch episcopacy. Not only has this document been translated into many languages, even into rather bad Latin, but it was this document that helped me to attend the Council in the first place. The active Bishop [Wilhelmus Marinus] Bekkers [1908–1966], of the ’s-Hertogenbosch (Bois-le-Duc) diocese in The Netherlands, arrived in Rome for the Council; he took the initiative of copying my recommendations and handing them out to more than two thousand bishops. Cardinal Alfrink asked me to go with him and the Dutch episcopacy to the Council as one of three selected *periti* (one canonist, one ecumenist, and I was the systematic theologian).

At the beginning of the Council, this document (next to the official *schemas*) seems to be the first that was passed to all the bishops present in Rome. It influenced many bishops, directly or indirectly, as we afterward heard from many of them.

Another way I would have influenced the bishops was by giving weekly conferences for the Dutch-speaking bishops of The Netherlands and Belgium, bishops in the missions of Congo and Indonesia, and for many other episcopal conferences—of Asia, Africa, Canada, the United States and, last but not least, South America (CELAM).

On one occasion, I could have, as a member of an official commission, directly influence one of the documents of the Council. Dutch and Belgian bishops (with their Dutch and Belgian theologians) were responsible for preparing the first drafts or *schemas* for the chapter about marriage in *Gaudium et spes*. It was a well-written and balanced draft. Alas, Pope Paul VI intervened personally in our commission. Four topics were withdrawn from our draft commission; these topics were about family planning, remarriage after civil divorce, and so on. These themes seemed to be reserved to the pope and were not to be discussed by the conciliar assembly.

### What was the most significant moment at the Council for you?

The most significant moment at the Council was November 1962, when, by an intervention of Pope John XXIII, the *preconciliar* drafts were completely withdrawn as the basis for the official discussions in the general assemblies of the Council.

### What happened?

In the first three months of the Council, there was a fierce fight going on between the bishops of the world and those of the Roman Curia. At stake were the *schemas* (drafts) prepared in Rome by the *preconciliar* commissions installed by the Curia. During the daily assemblies of the Council, many bishops criticized many of those drafts. This situation led to the urgent problem of whether or not these drafts could or should remain the basis of the discussion of the Council itself. In November 1962 the bishops voted about the present *schemas*; the *Praesidium* of the Council decided that a vote upon this problem by the Council’s plenary assembly could bring the solution. The votes against the proposed texts were more than fifty percent, but a little less than the necessary two-thirds majority. In fact, legally, the pre-Vatican drafts remained *in possessione*. As a consequence of the votes, the drafts remained the basis for all further discussions of the Council.

Nevertheless, the day after the voting Pope John XXIII intervened personally, saying that with so many votes opposing the proposed schemes he found it morally more humane to withdraw all these drafts instead of submitting himself to a formally legal situation. This papal decision seemed to be the best solution at that very delicate historical moment of the Second Vatican Council.

A new theological commission, representing proportionally the votes against and in favor of the refused *schemas*, opened the possibility of preparing new drafts which better represented the opinions and convictions of the majority of the assembly. That was, for me and many others, one of the most significant moments of the Council. It was a courageous papal decision, a real consequence of what John XXIII in his opening address meant by his “*aggiornamento* of the Catholic Church” and his call against troublemakers and “prophets of doom.”

This moment stood in sharp contrast with our common, more negative mood when we arrived in Rome; the climate then was not very optimistic. Jesuit Father Karl Rahner, to whom I spoke many times in Rome, even refused at that time to discuss the start of a project that would later become known as the *Concilium* project: an international theological review that would have the task of explaining and pastorally applying the coming texts of the Council. Rahner’s first blockade of this project was based upon the reality of the situation: pre-Vatican *decennia* and of the “Synod of Rome,” in which the synodal drafts prepared for that local Roman Synod were automatically, without any criticism, accepted by the Synod itself. In such a situation, Rahner said, we would not have the freedom to say what, as theologians, we have to say in such an international theological review.

But after the fundamental turn of November 1962, Rahner came back to the pioneers of that *Concilium* project and enthusiastically said, "Yes! After this turn I totally agree with your plans." He saw a very good future for the *Concilium* project, not as an authoritative interpretation of the coming results of the Council (that was, indeed, not the intention of the initiators of the *Concilium* idea), but as theologians with the freedom to have their own say. Without being the ecclesial magisterium, theologians have their own level as scientific magisterium, in service of humankind and the church as "the congregation of God."

### What was the most negative moment at the Council for you?

I think the week that in the press was called "the black week of the Council." On November 16, 1964, the *Nota praevia* was published by "higher authorities"—not by the Council but imposed upon the Council. This document interpreted the collegiality of *Lumen gentium* in a much more tightened way than did the theological commission (according to its answers to the proposed amendments of the Council fathers). The commission explained what really is the meaning of the collegiality of the world episcopate in reciprocal relationship with the pope, who exercises the Petrine ministry *within* the college of the bishops. The General Assembly positively gave its votes in favor of this explanation. The *Nota praevia*, on the contrary, actually combined collegiality with the possibility that the pope himself could rule the church either alone or together with the world episcopacy. The monarchical papal regimen in earlier times was not disavowed; it could restore the extreme centralization of the Roman Curia as a power higher and above the episcopacy spread over the whole world.

### Of all the documents of the Council which one is most significant for you and why?

I would not say it is the most important document of the Council, but the most surprising document, by far, is the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes*. It breaks with many preceding papal documents from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries against liberalism (in the sense of religious freedom and the freedom of conscience), social engagement for the poor and the marginalized people. The Council [in *Gaudium et spes*] stated that the Spirit of God is also working in secular emancipative movements. Here, modern liberalism is not to be understood in the popular North American and Western meaning of being free from possibly everything, but in the historical meaning of some positive achievements of the Enlightenment, the North American and the French revolutions, without

defending the violence that accompanied these new human and humane values which previously were condemned by the church's hierarchy.

*Lumen gentium* acknowledged that the Holy Spirit cannot work only in the Roman Catholic church or in other Christian churches, but also in secular groups or organizations. This document revolutionized the way the church thinks about salvation and the Spirit outside the boundaries of the Roman Catholic church. *Gaudium et spes* is to a certain extent the Catholic answer to the French *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. In that sense the Council was, actually, an overtaking maneuver—the church catching up to certain human rights and new modern values.

But all these conciliar "renewals" were prepared for: before the Council by some theologians; during the Council itself by, for example, Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963); by the conciliar Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis humanae*), the ecumenical decree (*Unitatis redintegratio*) and the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*). These were the most important documents of the *aggiornamento* of the Roman Catholic church and its engagement in worldly, humanly existential and societal problems—no longer as an ecclesiastic annexation of worldly power (as in earlier times), but in a sacramental model (*Lumen gentium*), i.e., in critical service to humankind in its struggle with world problems.

The shortcoming of *Gaudium et spes* is a certain lack of cultural-social criticism. Historically it is, actually, rather ironic. The document that accepted such modern, liberal, new social values as freedom of conscience and of religion was published in 1965; only three years later these same values were questioned by the upcoming fundamental societal-cultural criticism, which found its first climax in the worldwide student protests of 1968. I am afraid I have to say that the church reacted too late; there was some social criticism in many societies before the Council, but what happened from 1968 until about 1970 was neither diagnosed nor foreseen by sociologists at the time of the Council.

The big impact of *Gaudium et spes*—let alone a whiff of secular optimism (in those years a very dated mentality in the Western world)—was that it broke with the struggle between medieval Scholastic and modern neo-Scholastic traditions. *Gaudium et spes* overcame the medieval Augustinism that neglected the peculiarity and autonomy of the social, political and secular sectors of the world and its societal structures, which nonetheless the medieval Thomas Aquinas defended as philosopher against medieval Augustinism.



Vatican II, on the contrary, took the reality of God for granted, hence “pre-supposed” to all what this Council had to say—and rightly so. But at that time (in Europe, anyway) the Christian faithful were already concerned about the traditional images of God. Religious Christian faith was at that time not self-evident anymore. In this respect the discussions in Rome during the Council were rather alien to many of our Christian faithful, and Vatican II didn’t strengthen of their faith in the living God. To be honest, the Council aroused more hope and trust among the faithful in the *aggiornamento* of the church itself. This yields a great benefit, although about twenty years later, this hope and trust (on the intra-ecclesial level) changed and became a great frustration for many Christian believers. In the same period, the impact of the reigning Pope John Paul II on the extra-ecclesial level (the world), concerning social, economic and multicultural questions and, above all, his care and interventions for peace, were wholehearted and positively accepted by the same Christians.

Ironically, we live in a secularized Western world that has never been more filled with religions, religious phenomena and movements. At the same time we are confronted with a deep crisis about the belief in God’s own reality and, on the other hand, many Christians are skeptical of a so-called absolutism of Christian claims, in which one’s own religion sometimes is identified with the living God. Among believers in a personal God—Jews, Christians and Muslims—a tendency to radical fundamentalism is threatening the social and humane acceptability of faith in God. Neo-conservative Christians, above all in the United States, rule the air waves at the moment; and some Catholics are not aliens on this terrain of direction. The privileges of *Opus Dei* and its behavior are, for many religious people, a thorn in the side. Many Christians no longer experience Christianity as a joyful, hopeful Gospel, a liberating and redeeming way of life, but rather as a kind of sophisticated, hairsplitting, detailed system of [in their articulations] everlasting doctrines and subdoctrines that camouflage the “hierarchy of truths” so fortunately emphasized in Vatican II. In such an atmosphere, the institutional side of Christian churches is in imminent danger of a religious ideology in which there is no distinction between “God” and “own religion,” with its dimensions of contingent and culturally conditioned embedding.

Another rather negative aspect of Vatican II is the fact that this Council was a remarkable, sometimes diplomatic “Council of compromises.” The final writer, for example, of the Dogmatic Constitution (*Lumen gentium*) was in fact not only a good theologian, but also a diplomatic, political member of the Belgian Senate. To a great extent, such compromises were the result of an elegant and stylish

respect for the majority in the Council vis-à-vis the little minority. The members of the Council had to make some compromises in order to save the essence of the new views defended by the majority and seriously attacked by a scanty but tenacious minority. In the solemn last votes about all the Council documents during the closure of the Council, only a quartet—say, four—of the Council’s members refused some documents. After the Council, that was the beginning of a break with the Roman Catholic Church, by what is called the Lefebvrist—the conservative schism of Archbishop [Marcel] Lefebvre [1905–1991].

But the reverse of the model of those compromises was that we now are sometimes confronted with some ambivalent hermeneutics. Some Council texts can be interpreted in the line of the minority, but the intention of the Council, explained in the official amendments of some claims of the minority or of other even more “progressive” members, was very clear for the majority of the assembly. In post-Vatican trends, many theologians were convinced that some measures and decrees of the Roman Curia reflected clearly the minority side of ambivalent articulations in the texts of the Council, without a fine feeling for the spirit and soul of Vatican II.

As a surprise, I learned during Vatican II the enormously different and incomparable situation of being present in real life with bishops and cardinals and many other people, including the media, during a Council, as distinguished from studying ancient and faraway councils (for example, Ephesus and Chalcedon). In the first case you are feeling the emotions, the frustrations, and the elegant but serious fighting of the members of the Council. This atmosphere overwhelmed me. In the second (historical) case, you had to find out yourself and recreate from silent texts the atmosphere of what really had been at stake and what was (at that time) the dynamic that was bearing on the deepest religious and humane longings of all the members.

I remember a little friendly struggle during the Council with Monsignor [Gerard] Philips (professor at Louvain), the secretary of the newly appointed (November 1962) theological commission. I told him my doubts about some diplomatic texts in *Lumen gentium*. He said, “After the Council the secretaries of the diverse conciliar commissions will interpret the texts in the spirit in which we have formulated them, and which we in fact have explained in a very open way in the official Amendments [the answers of the “reporter,” the official relator of each commission].” I replied, “Believe me, when the Council is finished, we will encounter many troubles with the lack of clearness of some Council documents. Their formulations are too diplomatic or too capable of multiple interpretations.



Above all, after the Council, I think the Roman Curia will regain its power after some time over what the theologians (with the bishops in your Theological Commission) have explained in the official Amendments [answers]. Directly or indirectly, the Curia will interpret the texts." He firmly did not agree. But after the Council, what I feared became true. Nowadays the impression is given that only certain members of the Roman Curia are authorized to legitimately interpret Vatican II.

### Should there be a third Vatican Council? What topic(s) would you bring to the table?

I think that the interval between the Council of Trent and Vatican I, and the later interval between Vatican I and Vatican II, are really too great. If there is a remarkable sociocultural change in a temporal epoch, the church stands in need of a Council. In that respect I plead for a Vatican III. But I am not sure about the "here and now" as the most opportune time of a new Council.

### Can you tell me why?

During the post-Vatican II period, the Roman Catholic Church became to a high extent a very polarized church. Many bishops think that the polarization is fading away. That in my opinion is a bad mistake. The polarization has already gone "underground": it strikes at roots, but is not "fighting for Christian freedom" anymore. It is indifferent to the church *as institution*, and that is not normal for a living ecclesial community, for a church. That institutional aspect belongs to the essence of the ecclesial community (as it belongs to the historical reality of every community). There is more. The result of the ecclesiastic policy of the church—above all, the policy on nominating bishops—has broadened the polarization in the midst of the episcopacy in many countries, all over the world. The relation between the *institutional* church and the great traditions of the *Catholica* and the Christian *ecumenicity* have remained for many years on standby.

In such a tense situation I would not be in favor of a new Council, here and now. We stand in need of a transitional time and a transitional pope, as was the (nevertheless) conservative Pope John XXIII. Pentecostal gifts don't leave either the church or our world! And those gifts of the Holy Spirit strengthen my hope and Christian gratuitous optimism.

The most important topic I would bring to the agenda of any new Council would be that of the reality of a real God. What is to be done about our talk

*about* or, more urgently, *with* God? The Gospel is a way of life, the path of humankind's life on the way to God. If you want to name our nameless God, you cannot do otherwise than to name him in very human articulations, which are not stamped measures to express God's identity. That is the deepest meaning of what we call "infallible, solemn declared dogmas." They stand under the proviso of God's mystery, who (or which) is not identifiable. At stake is the real orthodoxy as direction-post for "going the path of God": following the human manifestation and way of life of Jesus of Nazareth, warranted by the humanly risky faith in God who raised the crucified Messiah.

### What has been the most significant liturgical achievement and what do we yet need to do to implement full, conscious and active participation?

The Council spoke about active participation and inculturation. But when you read contemporary documents from bishops or the magisterium about the liturgy, you can see a certain pattern of overemphasizing the minority of "liturgical rebels." These are being generalized in the liturgical renewal on the whole. Since Vatican II, sacramental liturgical practice has assumed widely divergent forms. In some countries (including The Netherlands), the verbal aspect of the liturgy—denoted by the traditional patristic term *legomenon* (to a little extent rooted in the Hellenistic mysteries, but actually rooted in Jewish liturgical usages)—is emphasized. At the same time, the aspect indicated by the equally ancient word *drómenon*—festive, even dramatic enactments forming an expressive whole of gestures, postures, light, the space in which the liturgy is celebrated, and so on—is kept subdued, sometimes eclipsed by treating these things as inessential extras. In Africa and Latin America, for instance, liturgy is embedded in the indigenous cultures and is expressed realistically in a recognizable, enthusiastic ritual performance that acts as an identity-forming force throughout the celebrating community. The *drómenon* is much more important there.

In cases where *legomenon* is over-accentuated, some people are speaking of a kind of "Protestantization" that results in a purely verbal, sometimes cerebral liturgy, which evokes for some Christians deviating connotations. In the case where *drómenon* is over-accentuated, the central curial authority in Rome greets these enthusiastic celebrations with a certain hesitation and transparent accents of constraint. Lively, beautiful liturgy is going on in countries where the Catholic faithful often intertwine their animated and playful festive celebrations with still-archaic and outdated religious images of God.

A truly harmonious combination of *legomenon* and *drómenon*, or of word and gesture, is not easily achieved. To my mind, that is understandable after so many centuries of stagnation of open (albeit disciplined) liturgical creativity, which had been curbed in Catholic churches since the Council of Trent until some new inaugurations during the last years of Pope Pius XII and the great liturgical constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*, the first accepted conciliar document of the Council. Thanks to the Second Vatican Council the liturgy is liberated from its fixation on rigid adherence to formulas and gestures. The Council brought some flexibility.

The scope this opened up unleashed a fervor that led, in some ways, to an impetuous approach that was hardly justifiable, either liturgically or theologically, by the modest innovations of the Council. Nonetheless, no one can be blamed for the fact that a harmonious balance in the current sacramental, liturgical praxis is not self-evident at this stage of searching for both the human and liturgical dimensions of vividly beautiful Christian celebrations. Accusations in this regard, particularly if directed to our best pioneers in the field of liturgical innovations, I consider plainly unfair and ungrateful (even when there have been some failures).

While Christianity may be a school of wisdom, it is not a philosophical institution. Besides the dogmatic tradition, which transmits the substance of the Christian faith through reflective documents, authoritative traditions, academic theological traditions, and popularizing theological traditions, there are other ways in which the Christian Gospel fans out in all sorts of traditions. The first that comes to my mind are the biblical stories depicted in mosaics, sculptures and paintings in ancient primitive little house churches, and later on in patristic basilicas and medieval cathedrals. They familiarized the faithful with the stories of the Old and the New Testaments. Secondly, one should not forget the mystagogy from the time of the Church fathers, a practice that remained firmly focused on knowledge, instruction in the practice and a mystical, intensified experience of the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, anointing or confirmation, and the Eucharist. Third, there are the vitally important experiential and religious practices that come on the tides of the church's liturgical seasons.

The ritual, liturgical expressions of religious belief are what the Christian sacraments are about, expressing and passing on a shared religious identity. But to many believers these expressions are now in crisis, a crisis so acute that many have turned their backs on sacramental practice.

## What Council teaching was most difficult to implement in the local churches?

To my opinion, it is not the teachings of the Council that are difficult to implement in the local churches, but merely the formulation—and therefore the interpretation—of the teachings. The teachings of the Council have a general and universal formulation, which implies that more (sometimes contradictory) interpretations can be given for one and the same statement. That is why it has been possible in Africa and Asia to adjust the teachings of the church to their own situations.

Finally, in view of the multicultural, multireligious situation in our world, in my opinion the church stands in need of an interreligious dialogue. Today, such dialogue and interreligious collaboration on some levels must have urgent priority on our agendas.

On the other hand, I remain thankful for the Second Vatican Council. In all its ups and downs, in its effervescences and its moments of human shortcomings, this Council—from the beginning to the end—happened not without the sensitive and active gift of God's Holy Spirit and not without our human powerlessness, disability and failures. I believe in the Pentecostal leading of the divine Spirit, knowing that ecclesial activities are a very human enterprise as well.



Dr. Edward Schillebeeckx OP was born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1914 and studied philosophy in Ghent, theology at the Catholic University of Louvain, and at the Collège de France in Paris. In 1952 he defended his doctoral thesis in theology at Le Saulchoir in Paris. During that same period he was appointed a lecturer in dogmatic theology and spiritual director at Louvain. In 1958 he accepted the chair of dogmatic and historical theology in Nijmegen (The Netherlands). During the Second Vatican Council and at the Pastoral Council in Noordwijkerhout (1966–1970), he was advisor to the Dutch bishops. Since that time, Schillebeeckx played and is still playing a major role in ecclesiastic and theological renewal. He received several honorary doctoral degrees and was honored with the prestigious *Praemium Erasmianum* in 1982. A full bibliography of Schillebeeckx's work can be found at [www.kun.nl/Schillebeeckx](http://www.kun.nl/Schillebeeckx). At present he is working on a book about the sacraments.